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## The Worth of Aura in the Work of Fine Art Publishing

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# Bard

The Worth of Aura in the Work of Fine Art Publishing

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Alexander Kunin Bacon

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2017



For Jonah, Sophia, Alex, Yuka, Logan, Jamie, Lynn, Gus, Jeremy, Mia, Aaron, Daniel, Janet,  
Patrick, and Jean:

This project would not have been possible without you.



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**Introduction:**

“This is a somewhat unconventional part of the art world,” comments Logan, a director at a prominent print gallery in New York City (hereafter referred to with the pseudonym Art Editions). It is around 10 a.m. on a hot weekday morning in August 2016, and Logan and I are sitting at his desk in the backroom of the gallery. A current of cool air chills the sweat on the back of my neck while I speak with Logan about his work as the gallery’s director of sales. His desk, like seemingly everything else in the gallery that is not a work of art, is painted a pure, flat white. Three framed prints hang on the wall behind Logan’s desk. To my right, wall-fastened shelves hold Logan’s photos, art books, and a collection of small sculptures.

“The print world,” Logan tells me, “is an exception in many ways, and because it’s an exception in many ways, the people within it tend to stay within it, and the people that buy things within it tend to stay within it.” There is perhaps no better word to characterize the print world than “exception.” Commonly referred to as “fine art publishing,” the print world is an exception in the art market, where paintings and sculptures are the most highly valued and sought after objects; it is an exception in museums, where painting, sculpture, video, digital art, installation art, photography, and performance art remain the most popular media within a vast majority of curatorial departments, new and old; and it is an exception in the academy, whose relationship to fine art publishing can be characterized as predominately distant and uninterested (Hansen 1995).

The print’s position on the periphery of the art world is a result of the perception that prints are not wholly authentic works of art. Printmaking’s historical position as a medium of image democratization, mass reproduction, and mass dissemination has contributed to the



perception that printing is not a legitimate form of art making. As a medium rooted in mechanical reproduction, printmaking is commonly misrepresented as a means for producing inauthentic reproductions of singular, unique works of art (Hansen 1995). During one of our conversations, Logan ventured so far as to describe the print world as a ‘ghetto’:

The print world is like a little ghetto within the larger art world. It really is this sort of like, uh, walled off place that seems to have, you know—I guess that’s probably, uh, a really terrible analogy, but there is this sort of... There are people who collect unique work who come to the print world to buy things; there are unique things here in the print world that are monotypes, or hand-painted mono-prints, or whatever they are, that we sell to people who are not traditionally print collectors; and then occasionally someone will sort of come across to buy a Chuck Close print ‘cause they can’t afford a Chuck Close canvas, or something like that.

The ‘ghetto’ analogy is undeniably indelicate, though it is helpful for thinking through the circumstances surrounding the print world’s separation from the rest of the art world. Most notably, Logan appears to be suggesting that the print world does not itself promote isolationism; on the contrary, the print world’s marginalized status is, in Logan’s opinion, a product of art world insularity.

In this thesis, I examine the systems of valuation that shape the production of fine art prints in Art Editions’ galleries and print shops. By looking at both the creation of prints in the printing workshop, and the selling and exhibiting of prints at Art Editions, I aspire to complicate the notion that the economic value of a work of art is determined in relation to its aesthetic value. In addition, I contend that the value of the work of art is influenced according to the context of its display. In so doing, I address the following questions: To what extent is the value of the fine art print contingent upon the context of its display? Is it possible to consider the economic value of works of art without reference to their aesthetic qualities? What does the New York City print market reveal about the relationship between an artwork’s aesthetic value, on the one hand, and

its economic value, on the other? How do mechanically reproduced objects become authentic works of art?

Art Editions is unique in that it functions both as a fine art publisher and as a for-profit gallery; in other words, it is directly involved in creating, exhibiting, and selling artwork. In addition to producing and publishing prints for sale on the primary market, Art Editions also exhibits and sells prints on the secondary market.<sup>1</sup> The gallery owns two printmaking workshops, located in Manhattan and Brooklyn, respectively (henceforth referred to as the Manhattan shop and the Brooklyn shop).<sup>2</sup> Art Editions also has two gallery showrooms, one near Midtown Manhattan, and the other in the Manhattan neighborhood of Chelsea (hereafter described as the Midtown gallery and the Chelsea gallery).<sup>3</sup> Whereas the Chelsea gallery deals almost exclusively in contemporary editions published and produced by Art Editions, the Midtown gallery sells both contemporary editions and prints produced by twentieth century masters, including Max Ernst (German, 1891-1976), Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928-2011), Sol LeWitt (American, 1928-2007), Ed Ruscha (American, b. 1937), and James Turrell (American, b. 1943).

Gallery directors oversee projects, pay printers' salaries, and manage expenses, such as studio overhead, project materials, and printing supplies. They also quote prices on new artwork, recruit artists, and sell work on the showroom floor. As most artists do not own their own printmaking workshops, fine art publishers build and manage their own print ateliers, which

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<sup>1</sup> 'Primary market' is a term used to describe new artwork that is entering the market for the first time. The 'secondary market' refers to artwork that a gallery or art dealer is selling on the behalf of a collector, or pieces that a gallery or dealer has purchased with the intent of reselling at a profit (Velthuis 2010).

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms 'printmaking workshop,' 'print shop,' 'shop,' 'printing studio,' 'print studio,' and 'print atelier' interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms 'print gallery' and 'gallery' interchangeably whenever I am not referencing a specific showroom (i.e., the Manhattan gallery or the Chelsea gallery).

artists can pay to use and create work in.<sup>4</sup> So too, the fine art publisher's master printmakers must also perform managerial tasks. Quite literally a master of all printing techniques, the master printer utilizes her printmaking expertise and superlative technical ability to transform an artist's creative vision into a print edition. In addition to producing fine art prints, the master printmaker will manage entire printing operations, and keep detailed records of every facet of print production, including materials consumed, hours logged, ink recipes, press pressures, and so forth.

Representing a niche within the art market, fine art publishers depend financially on a very small group of consumers with the pecuniary wherewithal to afford fine art prints. As Logan mentions above, this group of fine art print consumers is primarily composed of individuals who are print collectors; individuals interested in owning unique prints; and the occasional art world crossover—that rare individual who is willing to “come across” to the print world because he “can’t afford a Chuck Close canvas.” Though they do not receive the staggering economic valuations associated with their ‘unique’ counterparts, prints are—or, at least, can be—highly economically valuable. For instance, the prints published by Art Editions range in price from roughly \$5,000 to \$150,000 (all prices USD). Historic prints, such as those by Edvard Munch (Norwegian, 1863-1944 [Sotheby’s 2016]) and Jasper Johns (American, b. 1930 [Sotheby’s 2017]), have been known to sell at auction for prices exceeding \$1,000,000.

It is not only the historical position of printmaking, however, but also the conception that prints are themselves objects removed from history (Benjamin 2007), which contributes to the print’s discredited status in the art world. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of

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<sup>4</sup> By contrast, galleries who sell and exhibit ‘unique’ artwork expect artists to manage their own practices and studio spaces—i.e., rent their own studios, buy their own materials, and hire their own assistants.

Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin contends that, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 2007:220). For Benjamin, the delicate touch of the artist’s hand cannot help but succumb to the brute force of the printing press. When plate and paper meet on the bed of the printing press, a most remarkable transformation occurs: in mere seconds, a blank sheet of paper metamorphoses into a work of art. The artist will devote hundreds if not thousands of hours to preparing the printing matrix, only for her labor to be rendered invisible in the amount of time required for a sheet of paper to absorb the ink spread over the face of the printing plate.

The print’s already strained relationship with authenticity is made considerably unstable by the fact that some artists do not touch prints until they sign and number them. Many fine art publishers, Art Editions, operate as collaborative printing presses, meaning that they emphasize collaboration between artist and master printmaker throughout the printmaking process (Rippner 2004). This practice, which emerged in the United States during the 1960s, is perhaps the most exceptional aspect of fine art publishing (Rippner 2004), for no matter how much time and energy the printmaker devotes to creating an edition of prints, only the artist will sign and number them. Indeed, it is the case in most collaborative print ateliers that the printmaker’s hand, not the artist’s, is erased in the printing press.

#### **Discussion of methods/structure of the thesis**

I performed ethnographic fieldwork at a New York City fine art publisher over a three-month period from June 2016 to August 2016. I gained access to my field site with the help of the parent of a fellow Bard student, who contacted informants on my behalf, and provided me with the contact information of individuals who expressed interest in participating in my

research. I refer to all of my informants and field sites using pseudonyms. My empirical data consists primarily of ethnographic field notes, and formal and informal interviews. All of my interviews, formal and informal, were conducted in my informants' workplaces. As a result of the busy schedules of my informants, and the limited amount of time I was able to spend in the field, I succeeded in conducting only 6 formal interviews. I supplemented these interviews with extensive observation in Art Editions' galleries and print shops. I also maintained an active email correspondence with Logan throughout the duration of my research.

This project is, to the best of my knowledge, the first-ever anthropological account of fine art publishing in the United States. Consequently, this thesis does not contribute to a preexisting body of literature *per se*. Instead, I draw from multiple disciplines in the social sciences and humanities in order to develop an original theoretical framework for presenting my account of Art Editions.

Applying the theoretical models outlined in the second half of the introduction, the first section examines the role of aura in the production of economically valuable fine art prints in the gallery. Drawing on my empirical data, I suggest that gallery directors produce auratic narratives that function to substantiate the economic value of fine art prints. In doing so, I investigate the benefits and limitations of the theoretical structures described in the introduction, and develop my own theory of aura centered on its narrative formation in the gallery. These narratives, I contend, are essential to the gallery's ability to provide evidence for and thereby prove reasonable the economic valuations it bestows unto its inventory.

In the second section we shift our focus to Art Editions' two print shops. Drawing heavily from my empirical data, I examine the life of fine art prints before they enter the gallery. Moreover, in analyzing the print shop after the gallery, I hope to avoid preempting the

assumption that prints are auratic objects before they arrive in the gallery. By investigating the printmaker's relationship to the fine art print, I hope to reveal the ways by which the gallery creates aura only retroactively; that is, I contend that the gallery lends only retrospective significance to specific moments in the print's life in the print shop, enabling certain auratic narratives, and concealing the less auratic ones.

### **Analysis of theoretical frameworks**

In the gallery, a print's economic valuation is correlated with its aura. In the print shop, by contrast, printmakers are primarily concerned with a print's aesthetic value. Hence, in developing a theoretical framework for examining both the gallery and the print shop, we require a model capable of transcending the limits of the aesthetic/economic value dichotomy. So too, we desire a framework that, in addition to describing the system of valuation in the print gallery, can also account for the system of valuation identified in the print shop. For now, I attempt only to construct the foundation for the auratic value system identified in the gallery, but I return to a discussion of the print shop and its value structure in the second section.

When examining exchanges of monetary currency for works of art—in the gallery, the art fair, or the auction house—scholars tend to search for a link between an artwork's economic value, on the one hand, and its aesthetic value, on the other. The inclination to identify such a link is, it seems, motivated by the desire to determine whether there exists a universally applicable theory for conceptualizing if, and to what extent, an artwork's economic value is determined in relation to its aesthetic value. There are in general two methods for approaching this question (Velthuis 2010). The first, which I refer to as dualist models of economic evaluation, holds that a work of art is both a commodity and an aesthetic object. As such, the dualist model argues that the art market, like all capitalist markets, is driven by the desire for

economic profit. The second approach argues that an artwork's commodity form is a fetish, and is incommensurate with its intrinsic aesthetic form. While both of these approaches acknowledge the distinction between aesthetic value and economic value, neither sufficiently accounts for the extent to which an artwork's value is contingent on the context of its display. Thus, it is my goal to develop a theoretical framework suited to describing both the system of valuation in the print gallery, and the system of valuation in the print shop.

#### **Dualist models of economic valuation:**

In his book *Pricing the Priceless* the American economist William Grampp takes a neoclassical microeconomic approach to describing the role of aesthetic value in determining an artwork's economic value in the market. Founded on the notion that economic value and aesthetic value are directly proportionate, Grampp's theory, which he titles the "consistency of values," posits that an artwork's economic value is a correlate of its aesthetic value (Grampp 1989:21). By describing the relationship in these terms, Grampp proposes that one can determine the aesthetic value of a work of art by examining its economic value in the market.

Grampp defines "aesthetic value" as "nothing more (or less) than the qualities that make it [a work of art] desired by someone" (Grampp 1989:16). The utility of the work of art is its ability to satisfy the "qualities" that one desires in it; therefore, aesthetic value is a reflection of an artwork's "aesthetic utility" (1989:35). Under the consistency of values, the aesthetic value of a work of art will vary in proportion to its aesthetic utility; ergo, a work of art with more aesthetic utility will yield a higher economic valuation in the marketplace than a work of art with comparably less aesthetic utility. For Grampp, the relationship between aesthetic value and

economic value is most evident when a work of art is sold at auction (Grampp 1989).<sup>5</sup> In an auction, the winning bid is always also the highest bid (1989). Therefore, according to the consistency of values, the winning bidder will be the individual for whom the aesthetic utility of the work of art being auctioned is highest.

Although he argues that aesthetic value and economic value are commensurate, Grampp nevertheless acknowledges that the two are distinct from one another. He concedes: “Aesthetic value cannot be [a demonstrable truth], and at most it can only suggest a limit or segment of a periphery within which a judgment of value can be made” (1989:17). Aesthetic value is a quality that cannot be proven through empirical observation alone—it is not an ‘objective’ truth (Grampp 1989). However, Grampp maintains that aesthetic valuations are not meaningless. To the contrary, a buyer’s preferences indicate a judgment of aesthetic utility—a judgment, that is, of aesthetic value. Hence, to state that aesthetic value “cannot be” is no more an attempt to argue its meaninglessness than it is an observation that aesthetic valuations are always founded in the preferences of the buyer (Grampp 1989:19).

For those who are skeptical of Grampp’s strictly nonvariable model, a viable alternative is Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production, which takes a significantly more moderate approach to describing the relationship between aesthetic value and economic value. Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production locates within the art market “two modes of cultural production, ‘pure’ art and ‘commercial’ art” (1992:166).<sup>6</sup> The former, which Bourdieu

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<sup>5</sup> Economists favor auctions because they model interactions between buyers and sellers wherein all parties are equally well informed of market supply and demand (Economist 2002).

<sup>6</sup> In his essay “The market of symbolic goods,” originally published in 1971, Bourdieu uses the terms “cultural value” and “commercial value” to describe the duality of a work of art; however, in *The Rules of Art*, originally published in 1992, he refers instead to “symbolic capital” and “economic capital.”



labels “the anti-‘economic’ economy of pure art,” prioritizes the accretion of “symbolic capital, a kind of ‘economic’ capital denied but recognized,” which can be converted into “‘economic profit,” but only “in the long term” (1992:142). The mode of ‘commercial’ art, on the contrary, prioritizes “immediate and temporary success,” and utilizes economic logic to ensure the rapid accumulation of economic profits (Bourdieu 1992:142). Together, the two modes reflect the “two-faced reality” of the work of art: whereas the ‘pure’ mode privileges “cultural value,” the predominantly ‘economic’ mode privileges “commercial value” (Bourdieu 1985:16). Moreover, the two faces of the work of art are reflected in the art market, which Bourdieu describes as an “inverse economy”: the “anti-economic” mode, which prioritizes aesthetic value over economic value, is the logical inverse of the “economic” mode, which prioritizes economic value over aesthetic value (1992:142).

Bourdieu’s model is contingent upon the dualist structure he finds to be inherent in symbolic goods; namely, that they are both culturally and commercially valuable (1985). Whereas Grampp attempts to describe aesthetic value and economic value as directly correlated, Bourdieu suggests that the two are at most only indirectly related (1992). The models are similar, however, in that they both ultimately arrive at the conclusion that the desire to maximize economic profit is the primary driving force in the art market (Buchholz 2015; Velthuis 2010).

### **Two models of aura**

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin proclaims: “[That] which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (2007:221). The “aura” of the work of art, Benjamin writes, is derived from three key components: the artwork’s “authenticity,” its “historical testimony,” and its “authority” (Benjamin 2007:221). Hence, the process of mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the

work of art by stripping it of its authenticity, undermining its historical testimony, and discrediting its authority.

When a work of art is mechanically reproduced, its “authenticity,” that which is “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning,” is invalidated (2007:221). “Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity,” Benjamin continues, “the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object” (Benjamin 2007:221). There is physicality to an artwork’s “historical testimony” that cannot be reproduced in the printing press. For Benjamin, the work of art wears its history: “This includes the changes it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership” (2007:220). Cracks on the surface of an oil painting, rusting nails attaching aged and brittle canvas to a rotting wooden canvas stretcher, the tactility of a brushstroke preserved in a crest of cadmium blue oil paint: these things are not transferable in the printing press—they are as unique as, say, a work of art.

How, then, does the print gallery restore aura to a fine art print? To answer this question, we require the help of Diedrich Diederichsen. In his essay “On (Surplus) Value in Art,” Diederichsen proposes a theory for assessing the economic value of works of art using a modified version of Marx’s theory of surplus value. Diederichsen argues that an artwork’s economic value can be interpreted as an abstraction of the “artist’s living labor,” in addition to the “non-artistic living labor of the artist’s employees and assistants” (Diederichsen 2008:43). The artist generates surplus value using a combination of “constant capital,” or the amount of time spent in “bars and at art school,” and “variable capital,” which Diederichsen defines as the artist’s “seasonal production in any given year” (2008:35).

For the purpose of this thesis it is neither necessary nor productive to review Diederichsen's modified theory of surplus value in its entirety. I do not propose a Marxist analysis of the print gallery, nor do I find it necessary to do so. As such, it is only necessary to review Diederichsen's reconceptualization of "aura," as it will prove vital to my own attempt at revealing how aura is used to substantiate economic value in the gallery.

After a long and winding analysis, Diederichsen arrives at the conclusion that "aura" takes the form of a "metaphysical index,...which not only contains the abstraction of the artist's living labor, together with all of the labor previously invested in art school, nightlife, and Bohemian existence. It also contains the additional, non-artistic living labor of the artist's employees and assistants as well as that of subsidiary firms such as printers, foundries, etc." (Diederichsen 2008:43). My approach differs from Diederichsen's in that I am not concerned with describing the work of art in terms of its fetishized commodity form, nor do I wish to reconstruct an actor network-like description of input/output labor/value. Moreover, as I show in the first section, fine art prints are distinct from other works of art in that they do not acquire aura through a metaphysical index.

Diederichsen suggests that aura "might be described as the specific aesthetic qualities of the object" (2008:44). As opposed to Grampp and Bourdieu, who both insist that an object's aesthetic qualities are necessarily related to its aesthetic/symbolic value, Diederichsen's insight frees the aesthetic qualities of the work of art from serving as mere aesthetic utility. Hence, it becomes possible to view the art market in terms of the production of auratic objects, not the production of aesthetic ones. To appropriate Diederichsen's phrase (2008:33), aura is not aesthetic value; rather, it is the false semblance of aesthetic value.

The value of Diederichsen's approach as it pertains to this thesis is that it provides a jumping off point for theorizing economic value as aura. More importantly, it repositions Benjamin's conception of aura so that its existence no longer depends on the presence of 'physical traces.' To do so, Diederichsen describes aura as a form of "metaphysical index," an intangible catalog of once tangible moments and gestures; instances that have left their mark either in the surface of the work of art or, as I suggest, in the narratives we construct around it. Conceiving of aura as a "metaphysical index" allows one to move beyond the notion that the presence of aura requires physical traces and tactile gestures linking the work of art to the history it has endured and to the artist who created it. In other words, if we consider aura as a metaphysical index of sorts, it is no longer impossible to conceive of a situation in which the mechanically reproduced object becomes the mechanically reproduced *auratic* object. Aura, in this case, becomes the idea of authenticity, authority, and historical testimony. The aura I describe in the following sections is a composite sketch of a no longer attainable figure—the *Eros* of the print world. Its power rests in its ability to remain indescribable; indeed, economic value is the closest we have come to describing it.

## One

### On the production of auratic reproductions

During our final interview, I asked Logan for his perspective on why printmakers handle signed prints more carefully than they do unsigned ones. I had learned from my time in both print shops that printmakers tend to handle prints with considerably more caution after they are signed and numbered. Jamie, the master printer at the Manhattan shop, described signed prints as “a different animal,” and added that, “once they [the prints] are signed they’re... they can’t be broken; or, up until that point, they’re just works in progress. It’s a much more casual thing when it’s not finished.” Jamie’s candor led me to assume there was little room for interpretation on the matter. I took it as accepted that printmakers relate differently to unsigned prints than signed ones. I was wrong. Logan answered my question,

The people who work with the artist and make the prints, I gen [*sic*]—it’s not that they take less care, I think, with the object. I think it’s more that they feel more comfortable with the object—they know what paper can and can’t do; they know how they can treat it. I don’t think they would—and I also don’t think you’re saying this—but I don’t think they would treat it less well just because it’s not signed. I think they feel more comfortable in the way that it’s handled.

Printmakers undoubtedly feel more comfortable handling prints than do gallery directors, but, for Logan, a printmaker’s comfort with a print should not preclude him from handling it with reverence. In retrospect, I realize that he was responding to my question as the director of sales at a fine art print gallery. Logan not only sells fine art prints, he persuades others to buy them. To do so, he must convince everyone who enters the gallery that fine art prints constitute authentic works of art. Logan was not merely defending the economic value of fine art prints; he was attesting to the authority of printmaking as a legitimate form of artistic creation.

If Logan had corroborated Jamie's position, he would have inadvertently validated the notion that a print is no more valuable than the signature of the artist who created it. Moreover, he would have compromised the aura of the fine art print—a quality that he must maintain so as to ensure the gallery's inventory remains economically valuable.

In this section, I examine how directors produce and deploy auratic narratives to substantiate prints' economic valuations in the gallery. In this way, the print gallery is not only a purveyor of fine art prints—it is the producer of aura. Contrary to Diederichsen's assertion that aura grows alongside the work of art and depends, as he proposes, on the formation of a 'metaphysical index of value,' I contend that the aura of fine art prints does *not* emerge until they arrive in the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of aura outlined in the previous section will serve as a valuable theoretical tool for analyzing how the production of auratic narratives substantiates the economic value of fine art prints in the gallery. Most notably, it will provide a means for theorizing artwork's relationship to economic value in such a way that does not depend on the aesthetic/economic value duality. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the circumstances that enable aura to proliferate in the Art Editions galleries, and suggest that the print gallery accomplishes what Benjamin considered impossible: it restores aura to the mechanically reproduced object.

**The director as mediator, intermediary in auratic production:**

The gallery's director of sales is at the forefront of auratic production in the gallery. She oversees artistic production in the print shop, selects the artists who publish artwork with the gallery, determines prices, and—above all—manages the sale of artwork in the gallery. She is, in

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<sup>7</sup> I am not attempting to counter the claim that aura grows alongside the production of *unique* art objects, only fine art prints.

other words, the arbiter of aura. Diederichsen describes the role of the director as an actor whose task is to “[perform] intellectual labor, ...which cannot be described in detail but which acquires a metaphysical index in the mediated presence of the artist’s traces, in the mediated presence of the aura and its conversion into an ‘as-if-aura’” (Diederichsen 2008:43). Here, I attempt to describe *in detail* the mediation of aura performed by the director. Diederichsen argues that directors are ‘mediators,’ intellectual laborers who manage the development and dissemination of aura in the gallery. Via their mediation of aura, argues Diederichsen, directors develop a metaphysical index that contributes to the production of economically valuable works of art. The director describes an artwork’s aura as much as she contributes to it. She is more than a mere auratic “intermediary” (a term that I borrow from Latour [2005]); rather, the director is herself a component of the metaphysical index of value that appears in the form of the aura of the work of art.

My approach differs from Diederichsen’s in that I view the director as both “mediator” and “intermediary” (Latour 2005). Moreover, I suggest that, at Art Editions, the director is an agent who is capable of both translating *and* reinterpreting aura. Whereas Diederichsen positions the director as acquiring a “metaphysical index” by performing the “intellectual labor” of auratic production, I suggest that the director of sales at the fine art print gallery does not herself acquire a metaphysical index, but rather helps to construct one around the work of art. If directors were exclusively auratic mediators, Diederichsen’s would be a hopeless project.<sup>8</sup> This subtle

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<sup>8</sup> “Mediators,” writes Latour (2005:39), “cannot be counted as just one; they might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity. Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. No matter how complicated an intermediary is, it may, for all practical purposes, count for just one—or even for nothing at all because it can be easily forgotten. No matter how apparently simple a mediator may look, it may become complex; it may lead in multiple directions which will modify all the contradictory accounts attributed to its role.” Hence, a network of

repositioning is thus an attempt to examine how meaning is produced *collaboratively* in the gallery, as opposed to derived from a metaphysical index produced by a dispassionate network of artist and non-artist laborers. It allows for the consideration of factors that enable and delimit the director's agentic capacity.

I must emphasize, however, that the auratic narratives produced at Art Editions are not derived from metaphysical indices, as aura does not emerge until the print departs the print shop. Although I address this problem explicitly in the next section, it is important even now to differentiate between the gallery's auratic narratives, which are produced only in retrospect and do not describe auratic properties that are acknowledged by printmakers in the print shop, from Diederichsen's metaphysical index of aura, which considers aura as a property that is intrinsic to and produced in conjunction with the work of art.

#### **Liberties and limitations of auratic intermediaries:**

In the Art Editions gallery, a salable art object is not one, but multiple identical impressions. As such, when Logan recruits a new artist, or is likewise approached by an artist who is interested in publishing work with the gallery, Logan must first determine if he thinks the artist's work is suited to the medium of printmaking. In a sense, he assumes the power of a mediator. When assessing a project's potential value, Logan will "try to understand what the artist is willing to put into the process; meaning both image wise and the amount of effort." Some artists are not interested in producing work in editions, as they are not attracted to the idea of working in collaboration with a master printer, or do not wish to publish their work in multiples. Other artists might propose "projects that are untenable, either because of the way in

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auratic mediators would most likely be entirely incomprehensible. Introducing the director-as-intermediary greatly increases our chances of describing accurately the auratic properties of the work of art.



which they would need to be produced, or because the image would be so esoteric that they never would be a salable object. Or, you can't say never, but foreseeing its life as a salable object would seem like a very small possibility." Directors thus prefer publishing artwork that they believe has the potential to succeed as a print edition and appeal to multiple buyers. As a result, directors must estimate a project's potential economic value before production ever begins in the print workshop. They do so by estimating project expenses, evaluating the prices of similar works sold at auction, analyzing the artist's market, and estimating potential returns. Ultimately, in order for a project to be approved, the director must arrive at a number that he believes will cover all potential project related expenses, and generate a profit for both gallery and artist.

These decisions are themselves auratic mediations, but the director's agency is not boundless. In assessing a project's *potential* aesthetic and economic qualities, the director is performing the role of both enabling and precluding the creation of certain artworks. However, Logan's personal taste does not always align with trends in the art market. He is thus an "intermediary" (Latour 2005) in that his decisions always reflect or anticipate trends in the art market. Latour (2005:39) defines "intermediary" as an actor or actant that, "transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs." Hence, while Logan does have the ability to both enable and inhibit artistic creation, his power is decidedly less extensive than that of the "director" proposed by Diederichsen (2008:43).

Logan is acutely aware of the power he wields as the gallery's director of sales. "Often times, works that I love best are the ones I know will sell least well," Logan recounted, adding:

Whether that's because they're black and white; whether that's because they're small; whether that's because the subject matter is difficult—you're judging things by different standards, so the salability of an object is quite different than your personal taste, or your level of an art historical understanding of an object, and how it will be viewed in the marketplace. There's sort of that, like, oh I'm going to put on my art dealer hat and talk

about the salability of an object, versus something that I actually think is quite interesting and valuable and will have a long and interesting life in the world as an object—as opposed to something that we’re putting a big price tag on that I don’t actually think will necessarily ‘stand the test of time’, whatever that means.

Logan must balance his impulse to publish work that he finds “interesting and valuable,” with the responsibility to publish artwork that will succeed in the market. The sheer fact that Logan can remove his “art dealer hat” when he wants to talk about an object’s historical significance is, I believe, indicative of the idea that economic value does not always accompany aesthetic value. In other words, where there is aesthetic value, there is not always economic value. Although Grampp (1989) contends that aesthetic value and economic value are commensurate, in the gallery there is no identifiable link between the two.

Readers might object to the claim that aesthetic value is not a contributing factor to economic value, citing Logan’s comment that, ‘black and white’ images, ‘small’ prints, and prints whose ‘subject matter is difficult’ tend to be less salable objects. While these are undoubtedly aesthetic characteristics, they say nothing about a print’s aesthetic value. Instead, they suggest trends in the art market; namely, that consumers prefer to decorate their homes, office spaces, or restaurants with large, colorful, or agreeable images, as opposed to small, dark, or esoteric ones. Images of both sorts can be aesthetically valuable, just as images of both sorts can be merely aesthetically pleasing.

#### **Deploying auratic narratives in the absence of physical traces:**

Because the process of mechanical reproduction erases any visible trace of the artist’s hand in the work of art, directors must highlight less apparent aspects of a print’s singularity in order to contribute to the production of its aura. Having reviewed the liberties and limitations experienced by the director with regard to the production of aura in the gallery, I continue my

analysis with an examination of how the gallery utilizes auratic narratives in order to substantiate the economic value of its inventory.

Of the many ways the print gallery connects the artist to a work of art, the most fundamental is the artist's personal signature. The purpose of the artist's signature is twofold: firstly, it represents the completion of a project—a moment that I explore in much greater detail in the following section. Secondly, the signature, or rather the act of signing, is an authenticating act. It serves to connect the print to the artist, thereby imbuing in the object the authority of the artist. Recall that authenticity and authority are two of the characteristics Benjamin attributes to the construction of aura. In this way, the signature appears to be more than a mere act of authentication: it is a transmission of authority from artist unto art object. While the artist's signature is primarily a formality, it is nevertheless a form of authentication. And without authenticity, there is no aura (Benjamin 2007:221).

Physical traces connecting the artist to the work of art increase the object's value in the mind of the consumer. These visible traces are themselves auratic, but so are the narratives that accompany them. "I think anything where the artist's hand is evident [makes the work more valuable]," Logan noted:

So anything in which a viewer both understands the print process and can be shown [by a director] what the artist's hand in it was, the more that you can point to that from the selling side, [and] the more attractive [the print] is. Whether it's a screen-print, or it's a hand-painted monoprint, like the one we have out in the gallery by Pat Steir, where it's like, 'Oh yeah, there's print, but then she painted on top of it.' And people like to say, 'Oh, so there's paint on there?' You know, because to them, that, that paint, that goop—whatever it is that the artist, ectoplasm, you know, residual whatever it is—um, adds value.

Here, the print director's role as an auratic mediator comes to the fore. It is easier to sell a work of art if one can convince the buyer that she is purchasing a piece of an artist, not simply the

artist's signature. After all, what is more authentic than an actual drip of artist-ectoplasm? If the director can point to an aspect of a print that cannot be reproduced, he can describe a reproduction in terms of its uniqueness. Whereas the printing press physically compresses time and space into multiple identical images, the hand-painted monoprint serves as an uncompressed physical record of a specific body's movement in time and space, a tactile remnant of an artist's interaction with the work of art. It provides, that is, a spatiotemporal dimensionality that is otherwise lost when the print is exposed to the force of the printing press.

Not all auratic narratives are based in visible evidence, however. During one of our conversations, Logan noted,

I think the print still occupies this place of being able to own something that is connected to the artist. It's hopefully signed and numbered, it's hopefully, you know, some version of somewhere on the spectrum between a unique work that the artist created to become a multiple, or a reproduction of something that the artist felt strongly enough about that they felt as though putting it in the hands of a printer, and making fifty of them or a hundred of them, would be worth while.

For Benjamin, if a work of art is capable of connecting the buyer to the artist, it indicates the presence of a 'historical testimony.' But the buyer of a fine art print is not necessarily purchasing a work of art that carries with it a physical record of its history.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he is purchasing an art object whose aura is derived in connection to the artist's 'unique genius' (Diederichsen 2008:42). The narrative Logan provides is thus implicitly auratic. In other words, Logan is describing the print as an opportunity to buy a work of art that the artist *wanted* to exist in the world as a multiple—making the print a quasi-physical representation of the artist's own personal desires. The print's uniqueness, moreover, stems from the fact that it is uniquely important to the artist

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<sup>9</sup> Historic prints, such as prints by Edvard Munch or Jasper Johns, may very well have extensive historical testimonies. New prints published by Art Editions, however, enter the world for the first time when they leave the print shop. Hence, the historical testimony of these 'new' prints will only begin to crystalize when they enter the marketplace.

who created it. While the object is itself a reproduction, the image reproduced is singular. It is exceptional in that the artist believed it deserved to exist in the world multiple times, in multiple locations, simultaneously.

Even in the mechanically reproduced print, directors must still be able to describe the way an artist was involved in the printmaking process. Every artist engages the printmaking process differently, and directors must have a nuanced understanding of how each artist contributed to print production in the print workshop. Logan highlighted the idea that,

Even if the artist singled out, you know, a single image from however many hundreds of thousands they've made, and said, 'this one should be in the world fifty times, or eighty times, or a hundred times', like a Chuck Close screen print; and then dedicates hundreds if not thousands of man hours—not his, but he's already done that, right, and he may very well be involved in every step of the process, like he was many years ago, still speaking of Chuck Close, or it may be more of a uh you know like managerial kind of position, where he's checking in on a regular basis, like a foreman rather than a, you know, uh, hands in each part of the process, working with very, you know, smart and trusted collaborators, and um. And so, in my mind, from a sales standpoint, you can make those arguments and say, you know, 'Chuck Close chose this image of all the images to make a print out of.'

When selling a print, the director is not only selling a work of art: she is selling a process. Chuck Close, one of the gallery's highest earning artists, often creates print reproductions of preexisting images. In some cases, he might touch a print for the first time when he signs it. That aura can nonetheless manifest in the gallery is due in part to the notion that, "The artist's singularity is no longer transferred to the object via physical contact with them, but via a spiritual one. The artist conceives the readymade, plans the project"(Diederichsen 2008:42). It is the task of the director to convince the buyer that the artist was integral to the printmaking process even if his signature is the only physical evidence of his involvement in the project. To do so, the gallery will point to the artist's involvement in managing the creation of the print—the artist is the architect, and the printmaker the craftsman.

Print publishers tread a fine line between profitability and salability. An artist's most 'iconic' images tend to be the most saleable—both for their popularity and their historical significance—but they are not necessarily the most abundant:

Now sometimes the artist and other print shops, or our print shop, will make too many images—and this is like, change my name kinda stuff—but it's like: they'll overproduce, and they'll put too much out in the world, and the consumers, you know, the people who really do pay attention— maybe eighty or a hundred people in the world that have that kind of money to buy another Chuck Close print— will notice that there's too much, um, there's overproduction.

Flooding the market lowers a print's economic value, and can have a damaging effect on a print publisher's reputation. As multiples, prints are not subject to the same laws of market scarcity as their 'unique' counterparts. The director of a 'conventional' gallery does not worry about artists producing too many paintings—these artists are labeled 'prolific,' not 'immoderate'. The print gallery does not share in this privilege. Print publishers must produce enough work to meet demand, but never exceed it.

A component of the print's aura stems from it being an image that an artist wanted to exist in the world as a multiple. Hence, the gallery takes immense care in selecting the artists it works with. Not only is there a risk in working with lesser-known artists, so too is there a risk in publishing projects with artists whose work is unpredictable, or whose subject matter is not particularly well suited to reproduction:

There has to be this concept that the print that we produce is both the art object and something that is going to be offered for sale as a multiple. And there are plenty of artists who care nothing for that, and have, either with us or with other print publishers, produced very difficult images—things that are neither pretty nor easy to be around; maybe very interesting, but they're very difficult.

If a project is to be successful, it must result in images that people want to buy. And because single images will be reproduced multiple times, they must be images that will appeal to multiple

potential buyers. In other words, from the perspective of the print gallery, a print must first be deemed capable of selling as a multiple if it is to be offered as one. Consequently, the print gallery must treat an entire edition as a singular, salable entity.

**Narrating aura via exhibition:**

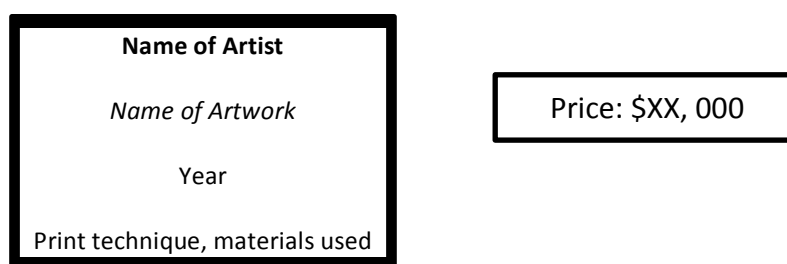
While the production of auratic narratives rests on the director's ability to clearly and effectively communicate to potential consumers the artist's role in the printmaking process, the transmission of aura is by no means limited to narrative recollection. In addition to narratives, the gallery establishes aura through the deployment of intricate spatial and physical auratic displays. The gallery's presentation of its inventory imitates the 'democratic character' of the print. It is 'democratic' in that it promotes an approach to selling art that is both transparent and non-exclusive. It is transparent in the way that it provides visitors with access to information, such as pricing, which is often difficult to obtain at other galleries. It is non-exclusive in that all visitors, not only potential buyers, are provided the opportunity to handle the artwork.

Transparency in particular is essential to the director's ability to successfully construct auratic narratives in that it posits a print's authenticity at the forefront of its display. Any testimony, historical or otherwise, which lends itself to authentication, must at the very least appear to be transparent. Hence, it should come as no surprise that the gallery's dependence on authenticity is reflected in the way it presents its artwork. Itself a product of mechanical reproduction, the print maintains a uniquely precarious relationship to authenticity; as a result, the Art Editions' emphasis on transparency is in many ways an attempt to reinforce the authenticity of its inventory.

For example, a majority of the prints for sale in the gallery are available in 'the racks', carpeted shelves on which framed prints are stored. The racks are akin to the bookshelves in a

bookstore in that, as in a bookstore, all visitors, not only potential buyers, are allowed to pull framed prints for personal viewing. The racks intend to promote accessibility and transparency, and they function in direct contrast to what one director described as the “standoffish quality” of some galleries.

Further, on the back of each framed print one finds two labels: the first details the print’s cataloging information and the second lists its price (see Fig. 1). In ‘conventional’ galleries it is largely uncommon to find information of this sort displayed alongside the artwork. Cataloging information is typically made available in the form of a booklet or a binder located at the gallery’s front desk. Prices are most always excluded—available, if at all, by request only.<sup>10</sup>



(Figure 1.)

The tension between a print’s aesthetic value and its economic value is visibly displayed on the back of each framed print. It is worthwhile to take a moment and examine the implications of separating price and cataloging information on the back of each print. Grampp might argue that the label presenting cataloging information lists the objective qualities of the print, while the price tag represents the sticker-placer’s interpretation of the print’s aesthetic utility. Bourdieu

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the customs and practices of art galleries in New York City, see Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*.



might argue that the two labels are ‘relatively autonomous’: they come to reinforce one another, but only when placed beside one another on the back of a specific print in a specific bourgeois gallery. The artist, represented by the sticker on the left, will spend most of her career adhered next to smaller price tags. The fact that she is now adhered beside a larger price tag indicates her ‘consecrated’ art world status.

The argument proposed in this thesis suggests that the arrangement of the stickers underlines the singularity of the print’s economic value. It is autonomous—unaffected by the information elsewhere adhered to the back of the print. The same is true of the print’s cataloging information, which resists direct association with the print’s price tag. This separation reinforces the notion that the two pieces of information are not mutually dependent. It provides, too, a strong symbolic visualization of the way the gallery attempts to construct aura. For example, if one decided to randomly peel one of the labels from the back of a frame, the other would remain unaffected. Removing the print’s cataloging information does not alter its economic value, and vice versa. The gallery presents the print and its price as indissoluble. Each label possesses its own primordial matter-of-factness, as if to suggest that the print is as indissociable from its price tag as it is from the artist who created it.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In this section I attempted to describe the processes through which directors deploy auratic narratives in the gallery. Relying heavily on narrative recollections of the print’s life in the print shop, directors describe prints in ways that maximize their auratic qualities. We saw, too, that the gallery constructs aura through a print’s physical display. It is worth noting that these physical displays do represent metaphysical indexes of sorts. While they are physical constructions, and while they are created outside of the print shop, they do represent living non-

artistic labor—the kind Diederichsen attributes to the metaphysical index. Perhaps, then, aura does take the form of a metaphysical index in the gallery. What remains to be seen is if such indices are produced in the print shop, as well. Hence, in turning our attention next to the print shop, it is important to keep in mind that we are venturing to a context that is, for printmakers, bereft of aura—but perhaps this does not mean that aura is entirely absent from the printing atelier. Just as Diederichsen's theory is not entirely airtight, neither should we assume the framework described here is fundamentally sound. There are always exceptions—particularly in the print world.

## Two

### Works in progress

I argued in the previous section that the construction of auratic narratives in the Art Editions galleries serves to substantiate the economic valuations of fine art prints. Having detailed the role of the print gallery in the construction of aura, we turn our attention now to the print shop in order to examine its role in producing fine art prints. I want to remind the reader that the structure of this thesis is indeed intentional—we do not arrive in the print shop with the expectation of discovering a metaphysical index of aura, as there is no such index to be discovered. As such, the structure of this thesis intends to highlight the distinction between the auratic narrative I attempt to describe, and Diederichsen's aura-as-metaphysical index. Whereas Diederichsen argues that aura grows alongside the work of art—as a product of the living labor of the artist—I contend that aura does not truly emerge until the print arrives in the marketplace. In this section we travel backwards in time to review the print's life in the print shop. In doing so, we witness an art object that, having not yet been auraticized, is not the same economically valuable object we encounter in the gallery.

#### A visit to Gowanus:

In July 2016, I visited the gallery's print shop in Gowanus, Brooklyn. It was a warm afternoon, and I was wearing my typical ethnographic garb: a baseball cap, jeans, a short-sleeved shirt, and a backpack. The print shop, housed in a single-story, redbrick, industrial warehouse in Gowanus, was identifiable only by its address, which was spray painted in large white numbers on the front of the building. Stretched along the rooftop, a roll of barbed wire served as the barrier between the print shop and the adjoined and slightly darker redbrick building directly due east. On the left of the shop's exterior was a glass garage door and, on the right side, a solid

metal door with a small glass window installed at or around eye-level. Fashioned above each door was a metal awning containing rolling metal security shutters.



A Google Maps Street View of the Brooklyn Shop.

I pressed a doorbell beside the smaller of the two metal doors, and half peered through the small glass window while I waited to be let in to the print shop. Caesar, a black and brown mutt with a sharp bark, was the first to arrive on the other side of the metal door. Following him was Lynn, the shop's master printer, who opened the door while she pleaded with Caesar to stop barking. The door opened to a communal space, befit with a small kitchen, a large wooden table, a variety of art books—stacked on the table and packed in cardboard boxes on the floor—and a

small desk with a white iMac from the late 2000s. For a moment, I felt as if I had entered a stranger's home.

The print shop and the paper mill were in the next room over. Skylights and the glass garage door suffused the space with sunlight. Lynn and I sat down at a table beside the garage door. I placed my backpack on the ground next to my chair and removed from it my pen and my field notebook. Leaning against the wall behind me were inked metal printing plates by the artist Shepard Fairey (American, b. 1970). As opposed to destroying the plates, which is the fate experienced by most such objects at a project's completion, Lynn decided to ink the plates and present them as unique art objects. Standing naked and unassuming against the print shop wall, the printing plates were exposed to an array of possibly dangerous forces—an accidental spill or a wayward step.

My eyes shifted from the metal plates to peruse the rest of large print studio. The space contained printing presses, large worktables, and white flat file cabinets, which doubled as print storage and artists' cubbies. Towards the back of the room was a large paper-press, a wet-corner complete with floor drains, water spouts, hoses, various water and paper pulp-filled plastic bins and buckets, and an array of papermaking tools, such as an experimental device designed to make two-toned sheets of paper (I was witness to what was unfortunately an unsuccessful preliminary test of this contraption). A room at the back of the shop was used to store items such as old printing plates and the shop's *bon à tirers*.

While I observed the papermakers produce paper pulp, Lynn briefly retreated into the shop's storage room to gather rubber casts and B.A.T. impressions from a series of prints the gallery published with the artist Leonardo Drew (American, b. 1961). I had viewed framed impressions from the same series of editions in 'the racks' at the Manhattan gallery just days

earlier. In the gallery, the prints were encased in sturdy wooden frames, protected behind non-glare, UV filtering, acrylic plexiglass sheets. Here, there was nothing to protect them from my oily, perhaps slightly sweaty fingertips. Lynn assured me that I was indeed permitted to handle the prints with my bare hands. But so intense was my fear of damaging one of the objects that, with exception to the rubber cast, I did not handle any one print for more than a few seconds at a time. In truth, I had little to fear; B.A.T. impressions are prohibited from entering the marketplace, meaning these prints did not carry with them the liability associated with an economic valuation. Forbidden from entering the marketplace, these prints were quite literally priceless artifacts.

In the print shop, printmakers do not regard prints as precious objects in need of safeguarding and careful handling. In an interview, Jamie noted: “Yeah, we’re much more casual with [the prints], than, you know, even the way I see individuals on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, which is the warehouse. Why that is? I don’t know. It’s like we grow it from the very beginning.”

Printmakers handle prints with a level of insouciance that is not considered appropriate in the gallery. For example, they do not necessarily wash their hands before handling prints, nor do they wear protective gloves to avoid exposing the prints to potentially oily fingertips. They hang test impressions with pushpins, and have an animal policy less stringent than that enforced in most restaurants.

The casualness with which printmakers handle the prints stands in stark contrast to Art Editions’ exceedingly cautious approach. One director commented that,

We in the gallery and on the sales side of things do tend to treat it more like a precious object. We do have a bit of remove because we know the financial, you know—we are the one quoting the price on it on a daily basis, so if you’re making things, whatever those things are, you’re liable to, I think, produce them and treat them, you know, nicely

or well, but not with all of the weight of the financial consideration that's placed upon it after it leaves the studio, or leaves the workshop.

As this director makes clear, the presence of an economic valuation has an immense impact on the way the print is treated in the gallery. Whereas printmakers physically interact with prints every day for up to years on end, gallery directors interact with a print's financial valuation, "quoting the price on it on a daily basis."

**It's like a team thing:**

When the gallery agrees to publish a series of prints with an artist, the director managing the project must decide which of the two print shops best suits the style of the artist. Factors influencing the division of projects between the two shops include a project's aesthetic quality, the shops' respective workloads, and, if there is one, the existence of a strong working relationship between an artist and a certain printmaker.

A project's success in the marketplace depends not only on the successful collaboration between a master printmaker and an artist, but also on the successful collaboration between the printmaker and the gallery. Jamie described the relationship between the print shop and the gallery as a "team thing," noting:

When a particular person from the gallery will bring a project in, I'm not going to say they own it, but it is a reflection of them if it's successful. There's not a financial thing, I think it's just a pride thing. They don't want to get any surprises, and we don't want any surprises, so if they communicate with us—getting like, what do you want, timeframes... just kind of really nuts and bolts, logistical kind of stuff.

From the printmaker's perspective, gallery directors are less concerned with covering project expenses than they are with facilitating the creation of projects that are successful in the marketplace. This is because projects are both financial investments for the gallery and emotional investments for the gallery's directors. If a director has a record of producing

successful projects, he can gain valuable reputation amongst art world professionals and deep-pocketed consumers.

In reference to the division of projects between the two shops on the basis of aesthetic quality, Jamie suggested:

Sculptors are maybe going to be able to hit the ground running a little bit more at the paper mill, generally speaking, and sometimes it's just the paper things that you need. When Shepard Fairey went out there [to Gowanus] he never had this dimensionality. [At the paper mill] he could get this really beautiful embossing, like really thick, kind of, uh... So that was a new thing for him, and I think that he enjoyed that.

One of the benefits of producing handmade paper is that it allows printmakers and artists to work collaboratively to create highly customized printing surfaces. Everything from the paper's density to its hue can be altered to conform to the desires of the artist or the needs of a specific image. In the example provided by Jamie, the Gowanus shop produced paper that was specifically designed to accentuate the embossed patterns in Fairey's prints. "He [Fairey] could've done stuff like that here [in Manhattan]," Jamie continued,

But he's such a prolific printmaker that what we offer here, it doesn't take it to, I don't know—I'm sure we could've come up with something. I don't know why [certain projects go to one or the other print shop], that is a mystery to me sometimes. Sometimes we could both do the artists that come in, we both could do it, and it would be a different end result, but generally when it's like that it comes down to workload, like who has more stuff going on.

There is impetus on behalf of the gallery to divide projects between the print shops in such a way that appears relatively inconsequential—i.e., giving a project to the print shop that happens to have a smaller workload around the time a project is set to commence. Doing so allows the print gallery to sustain the notion that it is the artist, not the printmaker, who is responsible for producing the creative components of the work of art. If either print shop gains a reputation for being more creative or dynamic than its counterpart, or, likewise, is viewed as



exerting too strong an influence over the artists who produce work there, the authority of both the gallery and the artist might decline in the eyes of the consumer, making it more difficult for the gallery to construct auratic narratives around its inventory. After all, inscribed on each print is Fairey's signature, not the printmaker's.

That is why, aside from the paper mill, the capabilities of each print shop must remain relatively homogenous. This relative uniformity emphasizes the importance of the artist in the production of fine art prints. The anonymity of the printmaker in both the display of and discourse surrounding the print in the gallery foregrounds the preeminence of the artist in the printmaking process—preempting what will become the ultimate excision of the printmaker in the print's life on display outside of the print shop. The erasure of the printmaker is essential to the successful fabrication of aura, as the print's authenticity is contingent on its being linked exclusively to the artist. For example, directors often cite the presence of the artist's hand in the work of art in order to weave traces of aura throughout the discursive recollection of the printing process. And to ensure this auratic weaving is successful, the director must retroactively diminish the role of the printmaker in the creative process.

#### **Learning the artist's language:**

Creative exchanges between the printmaker and the artist are made considerably easier when the two individuals are familiar with one another. "If it's an artist that no one's ever worked with," Jamie explained, "there's just that getting to know you, talk about the language of how you get into this kind of stuff." Throughout my research, printmakers often referred to the process of working with a new artist as 'learning an artist's language'. Some printmakers likened it to the experience of dating a new person. Jamie pointed to the fact that "it's hugely helpful if you have [good] relationships [with artists]," because "there are so many variables that you don't

have to discuss.” These variables include the printmaker’s ability to conform to the artist’s creative approach; suggest complementary or inventive printing techniques; develop a common vocabulary to ensure consistent and productive dialogue over the course of the project; and establish a positive working relationship that both inspires creative exploration and engenders a diligent work ethic.

At the beginning of each project, the printmaker will work with the artist to determine the printing technique best suited to the artist’s vision. These collaborations represent the printmaker’s creative labor—he must work to engineer innovative printing techniques that are complimented by the use of printing media. Jamie explained that, “When you’re doing like an edition project, you’re creative at the beginning and then you put on this production hat where you get really assembly line, you really try and streamline everything, because in theory all of the variables are kind of locked in.” That the printmaker performs the majority of her creative labor near the beginning of the project, before editions are proofed and printed, conceals in the final edition the printmaker’s involvement in the creative process. However, as Jamie makes clear, in most cases much of the creative work occurs at the beginning of the project.

A printmaker’s influence over an artist’s creative process will therefore vary in scope over the duration of a project. “There are so many phases, no matter what you’re doing,” Jamie recounted, adding:

There’s all these little steps along the way that you can kind of maybe point out things that are working, from whatever we see, be it the technical side, be it the aesthetics stuff, be it from a materials perspective. So there are all those little kinds of things that we can kind of nudge the artist, and kind of [say], ‘hey this is really working’, or ‘this is an easy thing for us to get to’. A lot of times [he’ll say], ‘if this is the desired result, there might be more than one way to get there’.

The creative work performed by the printmaker is markedly different from the so-called ‘creative genius’ of the artist. The printmaker’s creativity rests in his ability to work collaboratively with the artist so as to facilitate the creation of a successful body of artwork. The printmaker is likely to have a far more sophisticated understanding and mastery of printmaking techniques than the artists whose work he produces—hence the term ‘master printer’. Her influence is often most evident in decisions regarding the printing process and printing techniques. Typically, there are many ways for a print to be created—the printmaker’s task is to both accurately and honestly translate an artist’s vision into a printed image.

The prototypical ‘successful’ relationship between artist and printmaker is described in both the gallery and the print shop in terms of fruitful collaboration and fluent creative exchanges. “‘Do you feel like the artist?’ That’s always a question that we get,” said Jamie: “‘And it’s ‘no’, I mean, we’d get in trouble if we started to think like that too much. That’s a hole that you—it’s not going to lead to a good place.’” Jamie’s comment strikes at the core of a tension inherent to fine art publishing: How can collaboration between two or more individuals produce objects with only one author? It is easy to see the printmaker as a victim of false consciousness, another casualty claimed by the evils of capitalism. Too easy. Perhaps it is unfair that Jamie and his coworkers produce prints that sell for more money than they make in a year. Jamie tries not to think of it that way. And why would he want to? He loves his job:

I’m from Iowa originally, so when I tell [people there] what I do, they’re like, ‘you make the work?’ And I’m like, ‘No, if it wasn’t for...these big artists, I would never have the chance to even do this kind of work. If [the owner of the gallery] didn’t have this amazing print shop, where, in the 50s or whatever, when this printing, this kind of idea of fine art publishing came into play. [Before that] it was all artist-printmakers, it was artists doing usually like [one] woodblock [print]’.

As Jamie points out, collaborative working relationships between artists and master printers were nonexistent before the 1960s, when fine art publishing first emerged in the United States. Partnerships between an artist and a master printmaker can last for decades. In our conversations, Logan often referenced the partnership between Bill Goldston, a master printer at Universal Limited Art Editions, and the American artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930), noting that their collaboration resulted in some of the most expensive and well-known prints ever produced. In order for the relationship to succeed, the master printer must understand the artist's interests, her wants, needs, and her idiosyncrasies. The artist, too, must feel comfortable sharing her work with another individual. She gives to the master printer a great deal of power over the way her work is communicated—a rare relinquishing of authorship, especially in a profession so infatuated with the cult of the individual.

In fact, so pervasive is the romanticized conception of the artist—the indefatigable image of the creative genius—that the act of making can no longer be dissociated from the result of owning what one makes. Indeed, this is the very foundation on which aura is constructed—and the print gallery is no exception. In fact, the print gallery would not exist were it not for the power of the aura and the economic capital it provides. The printmaker faces the unenviable task of being at times an essential contributor, and at times a dispensable laborer. “I mean, of course I see myself as the creative person all the time,” Jamie admitted, “and, ideally, that’s what I hope keeps it new and fresh for everyone involved. But I’m also really aware that we have this big studio in Manhattan, and that, you know, we [need to] make stuff that sells; otherwise, I won’t have a job, and [neither will] everyone else that works with the company.”

The friction between the printmaker as creator and the printmaker as producer mirrors the tension between aesthetic value and economic value in the work of art. As Diederichsen

observes: “Artworks and art projects are capable of articulating content and enabling aesthetic experience independently of their commodity form. What is important, however, is that they do this through the auratic object, which has a highly specific connection with the generation of value” (2008:44). In the same way, the printmaker’s contributions to the fine art print do not disappear when the object enters the gallery; however, the auratic narrative deployed by the gallery’s directors will have the effect of foregrounding the presence of the artist, effectively veiling the creative labor performed by the printmaker.

Jamie expressed: “I don’t want to make stuff that goes and sits in drawers that no one likes, I want to make stuff with artists that—artists can come back in, it sells, everyone likes it.” Printmakers want the work they produce to succeed in the marketplace for a variety of reasons. While profitability is doubtless a common denominator in most interpretations of a project’s success in the gallery, it is also judged in terms of audience appreciation, personal experience, and memorability. For example, Jamie remarked, “if we make something that’s cool or whatever, other artists are going to see that, and they’re going to want to participate in what we’ve got going on.” Thus, a successful project can serve as a networking tool in that it might convince new artists to participate in the world of printmaking when they see the artwork, either digitally or in person, on display in the gallery.<sup>11</sup>

#### **The two acts of self-erasure:**

In the print shop, printmakers emphasize the aesthetic benefits of working by hand: “There are so many collage artists, and sometimes we do an edition of things, they want this thing replicated, they don’t want to maybe cut it out by hand, which always looks better, when

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<sup>11</sup> This is becoming increasingly the case as artists and galleries take to social media to exhibit and discover artwork.

you do that, and there's laser cutters and all that kind of stuff out there, so we're always trying to kind of keep it very handmade because that's kind of our strength." The printmaker's insistence to exclude any unnecessary mechanical technology from the printmaking process will reappear in the gallery, in the form of an aura.

Here, we see the first of two self-erasing acts performed by the printmaker: His insistence that the prints be made by hand is a narrative that the gallery will appropriate in order to isolate the importance of the artist in the print's creation. Because the residue of mechanical reproduction is indeed constituted by its temporality, mechanical reproduction will both accelerate the transmission of material from the one to the many and hasten the production process. As a result, the printmaker must convince the artist that, despite taking longer to produce, handmade images "look better" than laser cut images. In addition, taking the time to cut an image out by hand can prove crucial to the director's ability to distance the printmaking processes employed by the print shop from those within the realm of rapid mechanical reproducibility.

It is just as important, however, that printmakers develop a common understanding amongst one another. On a visit to the Manhattan print shop in January 2017, I watched as two printmakers, wearing protective rubber gloves and artist's smocks, worked on a large metal plate for the artist Chuck Close. From the comfort of a small couch in the corner of the shop, I observed the printmakers carefully carry the massive metal plate towards a rectangular plastic bin of slightly larger proportion. After lowering the plate into the bin, the printmakers effortlessly shifted the focus of their conversation from the task at hand to topics entirely unrelated to printmaking. After two or so minutes had passed, the printmakers, still wearing their smocks and rubber gloves, lifted the plate from the acidic solution. Holding the plate over the

acid bath, the printmaking pair tilted the plate in near perfect unison to a forty-five degree angle, allowing for the remaining acid to drip back into the rectangular bath below. The duo proceeded to carry the plate out of sight, to what I assumed was one of the shop's wooden worktables. A short while later, the printmakers carried the plate back to the rectangular bin, where they immersed it in the acid solution for an additional two minutes and fifteen seconds.

This process, described to me as step bite soft ground, is a combination of intaglio printing techniques. 'Step bite' is a printing technique wherein a metal plate is immersed in an acidic solution for sequential durations so as to etch in the plate an array of 'bites' of varying depths. 'Soft ground' is an acid resistant medium, which is typically made from beeswax and a softening agent, such as petroleum jelly. Using a brayer, printmakers apply an even layer of soft ground to a heated metal plate. When ready, the printmaker places a piece of paper over the plate and draws an image. The soft ground medium adheres to the paper wherever the printmaker impresses her drawing tool—typically a ballpoint pen or a graphite pencil. Once the desired portion of the image is drawn, the printmaker removes the sheet of paper and submerges the plate in the acid solution. The acid 'bites' into the plate wherever the soft ground has been removed, resulting in an etched metal plate that can be inked and transferred to paper via printing press.

My goal in communicating this process in such detail is to emphasize the amount of labor that is involved in preparing the printing matrix. An entire edition of prints will bear the impression of the same printing plate, and thus it is essential for the image incised on the printing matrix to appear exactly as the artist intended. Jamie commented: "I guess, at some point, like, the thing that we were just working on, those [Chuck Close] plates, we know that if you screw that up at this point, there's already a lot of hours just built in to get to this point, um, so I don't

know if I would call that part casual.” Unlike impressions, printing plates cannot be reproduced. Each plate is a physical record of hundreds if not thousands of hours of labor executed by the printmaker and, at times, the artist. In terms of its auratic properties, the printing plate is arguably the most valuable object produced during the printmaking process. If an individual impression is unsatisfactory—the paper was not properly aligned with the plate during the image transfer in the printing press, for instance—the printmaker can simply recycle the sheet of paper and attempt a new impression. If the printing plate is damaged—perhaps the plate is dropped and dented irreparably—the printmakers must produce an entirely new plate. Hence, whereas a damaged impression might at most incur a week’s worth of additional labor, a damaged plate might incur months of additional labor.

When the production phase of a project is complete, a most curious reversal occurs. The once invaluable printing plate becomes a liability, and the once dispensable impression becomes the precious and irreplaceable object one will find framed in the Art Editions galleries. With the printing of a project complete, the artist will sign and number each impression. As stated in the previous section, the effect of the artist’s signature is twofold: It not only authenticates the print, but, more importantly, it brings about the death of the printing plate. The destruction of the printing plate marks the printmaker’s second and final self-erasing act. At the end of each project, the printmakers cut into the surface of each printing plate so as to ensure the plate cannot be used to produce further impressions. When the printing matrix is destroyed, the individual impressions are suddenly irreplaceable.

Whereas for Benjamin, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (2007:220), in the print gallery, the opposite holds true: The absence of the printing plate, the “original” image, is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. The artist’s



signature not only authenticates the print, it prohibits the creation of inauthentic reproductions. And since authenticity is a prerequisite to the creation of aura, the destruction of the printing plate will prove a vital component of the auratic narrative developed and deployed in the Art Editions galleries.

## Conclusion: Meeting old friends in the gallery

Jamie often described encountering prints outside of the print shop as meeting old friends. I always felt a particular affinity for this analogy. In a way, it encapsulates in entirety the argument of this thesis. Not only do printmakers relate differently to fine art prints than do gallery directors; printmakers develop relationships with prints in ways that gallery directors simply are not capable of doing. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to recognize our friends as *our friends* when we see them in their place of work:

When I first see [a project in the gallery]... it's like you're in it and then, I'm still like, I'm still kind of blinded by it at the opening. So I can't really see it, a lot of times, because you're so intense in the project that it's difficult to kind of step back and just kind of see it in this new light, this new setting, with other people there that really want to see it, and they want to ask questions that aren't—they're like these weird little nitty-gritty questions, not just like looking at the image. And that kind of takes a while, to kind of erase all that stuff, and you just kind of get to view it in its new life now outside the print shop. At first it's just kind of inertia, usually, I don't really, it's in this new kind of, it's just in this new space, there's like the time between things and you can really kind of look at it again with a new light and experience it for, I think, like maybe how the artist kind of intended it.

For Jamie, prints take on a 'new life' outside of the print shop: they become auratic objects. The artist's intentions are foregrounded, but the printmaker's contributions are not lost entirely.

Guests at openings often converse with Jamie about the printmaking process—asking him the 'nitty-gritty questions.' Eventually the 'inertia' of the project is no longer noticeable, and Jamie can see the print as the artist 'intended it.' What remains unclear is if this clarity is in fact aura in its crystalline form. For now, this question must go unanswered. Though perhaps I, too, will one day meet my old friends in the gallery, and investigate this question more closely.

## **Appendix: Glossary of printmaking terminology**

It occurs to me that readers might not be familiar with printmaking techniques and terminology. Thus, I provide this appendix in order to review, to the best of my ability, some essential terminology in the printmaking vernacular. In addition, I describe four printmaking techniques: relief printing, which includes the woodcut and the linocut; intaglio printing, which includes engraving, drypoint, mezzotint, etching, aquatint, and many others; stencil techniques, such as screenprints and pochoir; and monotypes and monoprints, which are unique works more akin to drawings or paintings.

**Print:** An image, typically on paper, created from a matrix and produced with a printing press.

**Impression:** Another word for print.

**Matrix:** Also referred to as a plate, the matrix is the surface used to create a print.

**Proof:** An impression, created at any point during a project, which is not included in the final edition. This includes the BAT, trial proofs, artist's proofs, etc.

**Edition:** A set of identical signed and numbered impressions. Prints in an edition are numbered using Arabic numerals (e.g., 1/50, 2/50, 3/50...49/50, 50/50). Each impression in the edition is of equal value, as all of the prints are checked against the BAT and are therefore of equal quality.

**Bon à tirer (BAT):** French for “good to pull,” the BAT is the first perfect impression, as determined by the artist, in an edition of prints. After the artist approves and initials the BAT, there are no further trial proofs. Each impression in an edition is compared to the BAT to ensure

an equal standard of quality. Any impressions that do not meet the quality of the BAT are destroyed. The BAT is not included in the edition, and cannot be sold in the marketplace.

In relief printing, the printmaker carves into a surface, typically a block of wood (woodcut) or a piece of linoleum (linocut). Using carving tools, the printmaker cuts into the wood or linoleum block (also referred to as a plate or a matrix) so as to create an elevated surface. The plate is then inked using a hard rubber brayer, which provides a thin and even coat of ink or oil paint on the printing matrix. Once coated, a piece of paper is placed over the printing block. Then, using either a printing press or her hands, the printmaker applies pressure to the paper in order to transfer the inked image from the block onto the paper. The resulting image consists of only the elevated portions of the block or, in other words, only those areas of the block that were not incised by the printmaker. The printmaker can repeat the process using the same wood or linoleum block in order to produce the desired number of prints in the edition.

Intaglio prints are made using a metal matrix, such as copper and zinc. Images are either cut into the plate with the use of a sharp tool, such as a metal burin, or bitten into the plate with the use of corrosive acid. By contrast with relief printing, intaglio techniques require the application of ink to the incised areas of the plate. Ink is transferred when the paper is pressed into the recessions of the inked portions of the plate. The depth of a cut or the amount of time the plate is exposed to acid determines the shade of the impression. Corrosion is controlled with the use of an acid-resistant medium. This allows the printmaker to achieve multiple tonal ranges from one same pressing.

To make a screenprint, the printmaker adheres a stencil to a piece of fabric, typically nylon or silk, and stretches it over a wooden frame. The printmaker pulls a squeegee across the screen in order to push ink through the non-stenciled areas of the silk or nylon screen.

Screenprints can be used to print on a variety of surfaces. Pochoir utilizes stencils or stencil cutouts to make a print. The stencils are inked and pressed onto paper in order to create an image.

Monotypes and monoprints are unique works. Monotypes are created by painting or drawing directly onto an unworked matrix. Once complete, the plate is run through the printing press in order to transfer the image onto paper. On occasion, there is enough ink left on the plate to create another print. This second, lighter impression is known as a 'ghost' print. Monotypes that are made without the use of a printing press might be referred to as 'works on paper'.

Monotypes cannot be multiplied, and thus there are no monotype editions.

Unlike monotypes, monoprints are impressions that are achieved using an amalgam of printmaking techniques. For example, a monoprint might utilize an engraved metal matrix, a linocut plate, and pochoir. Each impression in a series of monoprints is slightly different. An edition of monoprints is often referred to as an *edition variée*.

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